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ABSTRACT

This paper contains ethnographic participant-observation field notes taken on a one-night visit to a "shooting gallery" in East Harlem (New York City) along with background information and commentary. East Harlem, also referred to as "El Barrio" or Spanish Harlem, is a 200-square block neighborhood on the upper East Side of Manhattan in New York City where the population is 40 to 45 percent African American, and the rest Puerto Rican. A traditional New York "shooting gallery" is a place that tends to be frequented by elderly, broken-down heroin "junkies"; these places are distinct from the "crack houses", which cater to a younger clientele who do not identify themselves primarily as addicts despite daily consumption of drugs. The bulk of the paper consists of a narrative of the conversations, actions, and relationships encountered that night. A short conclusion offers a larger commentary on the social conditions that breed the "shooting gallery" culture as well as a discussion of the usefulness and limitations of the ethnographic approach to the problem. (JB)

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SHOOTING GALLERY NOTES

Philippe Bourgois

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May 1991

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Introduction: Violating Apartheid

I have been engaged since 1985 in ethnographic research on the streets of East Harlem, New York where I lived with my family in a crumbling, rat-infested tenement opposite a large complex of public housing projects. I used the classical anthropological methodology of participant-observation fieldwork focusing on a network of youths and adults who participate intensively in the underground economy--primarily street-level, retail crack distribution. This means I spent hundreds of nights on the street and in crack houses observing dealer/addicts and tape-recording their life histories. I also visited their families, attending parties and intimate reunions--from Thanksgiving dinners to New Year's Eve celebrations. I interviewed the spouses, lovers, siblings, mothers, grandmothers, and--when possible--fathers and stepfathers of the dealers in order to situate them in their family and community contexts.

East Harlem, also referred to as "El Barrio" or Spanish Harlem, is a 200 square block neighborhood on the upper East Side of Manhattan in New York City. Although the population is between 40 and 45 percent African-American, it is considered both by its residents and outsiders to be New York's quintessential Puerto Rican community. Most of the individuals I befriended or interacted with are second-or third-generation New York-born Puerto Ricans.

According to 1980 census data, 29 percent of the population was at 75 percent of what is defined as "the poverty level" by the United States government; 48 percent was at 125 percent of poverty level; and 68 percent was at 200 percent. In other words, if one were to adjust for the exorbitant cost of living of New York City, well over half of the population would fall into the ranks of the "working poor". One in three families in East Harlem is dependent on public assistance and approximately half of all households are headed by women. The schools in the neighborhood supposedly have the highest drop-out rate in the country. Ironically, East Harlem borders directly on New York's wealthiest residential neighborhood commonly referred to as the "silk stocking district".

Harlem is visibly poor. Abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and rubbish strewn streets are the rule here rather than the exception. My block is not atypical and I can get heroin, crack, powder cocaine, hypodermic needles, methadone, valium, PCP, and mescaline within a 2 block radius of my apartment.

Despite this active street scene and the visible social and economic crisis it reflects, the majority of the adult population of East Harlem abhors drugs. Most heads of households work nine to five plus overtime at entry-level jobs and shun illegal activity. This majority, mainstream working class and working poor sector, however, has lost control of the streets and is in

retreat. Many residents, especially the elderly are obliged to live in terror venturing outside only during daylight hours and triple locking their doors at night.

The following set of embellished and edited fieldwork notes from one night's visit to a shooting gallery still need to be digested. Like the rest of my fieldwork project, they are still in process. I was especially excited by this particular night of fieldwork because over the past years the shooting-gallery scene has been off limits to me. The crack houses where I spend most of my nights cater to a younger, more Hispanic clientele many of whom do not identify themselves primarily as addicts despite their daily or nightly ingestion of narcotics. Frequenters of New York's traditional shooting galleries tend to be "elderly", broken-down heroin "junkies". The particular gallery I visited happened to be all African-American.

My crack-addicted and selling friends would never set foot in such a setting. Although many of them snort heroin, they carefully hide their opiate use pretending to be solely self-respecting coke-sniffers. Street injectors of heroin and cocaine who frequent shooting galleries are at the very bottom of the underground economy's complicated hierarchies. What follows, therefore, is a primarily descriptive account of a moment in the experience of addiction by those on the street who have unconditionally embraced a public junkie persona:

Notes: March 23, 1990

I finally went to a shooting gallery last night. It was a frozen pocket of fetal ecstasy encysted in hell; a conveyor-belted factory for transmitting brand new, fresh HIV positives. We passed through two "doorways" of an abandoned, burned out and long-since-tax-defaulted, City-owned building with rain dripping through the burnt rafters. It was a March night and the drizzle turned to fresh, clean, white snow by the next morning.

"Copping"¹

Before going to the shooting gallery, White Mikey had to pick up two bags of dope. That was the incentive for letting me tag along. I was treating. It was really just a case of medicated charity. While I was taking in the evening air around midnight on my tenement stoop, Mikey had come up to me complaining that he had not had a fix since early morning and it was pushing midnight. Through the hollow coughs and obvious pain on his face, he cursed the ache in his legs--that is the way his physical addiction first reveals itself by cramping his lower limbs. When I commented skeptically on his cough, he assured me that if I "helped him out," as soon as he was "straight" [i.e., had injected his necessary dose of heroin] he was going to check into Metropolitan Hospital [East Harlem's Municipal Hospital] and get his pneumonia taken care of.

First we went up to 117th street opposite P.S. 155, an elementary school where the district offices for East Harlem's public school system are located along with another huge hulk of an abandoned building that was once a junior high school. 117th is a classic New York copping corner with junkies lining up obediently to purchase their desperate supply.² The block was crawling with police. No way to "cop" [purchase drugs] calmly around there. A squad car was waiting on First Avenue with another "cruiser" [police car] coming down the block. Some skinny, emaciated combination crackhead/junkie type of person told us that "Kickin'" was "workin'" and that "the shit is pumpin'". It's smokin' man!" It was definitely "too hot" for us to get "served", however, because the second police car was "bajando" coming down the street. The second-generation, Harlem-bred lookouts were shouting the alarm in their almost folklorically rural Puerto Rican jibaro [hillbilly] accent that rolls the "r's" as if speaking French, "carro feo [ugly car], bajando, bajando [coming down] carro feo!" .

We were careful not to break stride so as not to justify a search by the police in the oncoming "cruiser". We just kept on walking down the block--perhaps a little too fast--with our heads bent down--perhaps just a little too low--and our arms swinging--

a little too fast and wide--right past the bajando cop car, pretending we had not noticed it. There were more whistles and "bajando" shouts as other eager junkies were turned back at the far corner on Second Avenue before starting the trek towards First Avenue down this copping stretch. We were already too far down the block towards First and too much in view of the police to turn around when the warning shouts had sounded. Besides, as Mikey assured me in a whisper, aside from his "works" [hypodermic needle] stashed in his waist, we were "clean" [drug free].

Nevertheless, it was one of those "pregnant pause" moments that I especially hate: the police are coming towards me on a known copping corner and I cannot help but fit the drug addict profile, being the white-boy that I am in the middle of the night in East Harlem. If I spin around and walk away from the oncoming car too fast, the police might speed up, flash their lights, bloop their siren, hop out of their car and frisk, curse, and otherwise debase me--"Dirty scumbag white-boy, what are you doing here... etc etc?" If I keep on walking right at them I might just be setting myself up lemming-style to deliver myself helplessly and stupidly to a violent frisk and humiliating harangue. In America's version of apartheid, being white in El Barrio--especially at night--is a provocation. It offends the angry, frustrated, also white cops who are itching to get revenge on the good-for-nothing, drug-addicted street scum living off their taxes and strained budgets.

As if to make matters worse, Mikey almost managed to allow some unnecessarily prolonged communication with an emaciated beggar/"steerer" burst into violent confrontation. The "steerer" was a typical broken-down junkie who had gotten recently addicted to crack³ and who, therefore, now grovels and slouches in the gutters alongside copping corners as a volunteer look-out and petty hustler to generate petty cash for his crack craving. Almost running to keep up with our fast pace, inspired by the oncoming police, the "thirst" [crack addict] was trying to hustle a dollar from us. Presumably his justification was going to be that he had told us "Kickin" (a local heroin company's brand name) was "open", that its quality and "count" [the quantity of powder in each bag] was good, but that the cops were bajando. He had also pointed out the usual team of sellers⁴ huddled around one another near the end of the block towards First Avenue who would have served us had the coast been clear.

Mikey's mistake was not ignoring him. Instead, Mikey--who is a little rough around the edges and probably was angry at being hustled for being white when he himself is a hard-core, scrambling addict--protested that we were "Okay" and had "no extra funds". Perhaps the thirsty addict had not yet completely resigned himself to his burned out beggar status, because he started loudly in an aggressive/defensive inner-city-hurt-pride

tone saying "I hate it when people be thinking shit about me. Why you thinkin' I be askin' somethin' from you?"

I walked even faster hoping that if this unnecessary scene escalated to violence the beggar would see that I was not really with Mikey and that I had not been directly involved in "dissing" [disrespecting] him. I was also surprised and exasperated that a seasoned junkie like Mikey had made such an unstreet-wise error, accidentally "dishing" [Puerto Rican alternate pronunciation of dissing] someone when we could have just walked away and pretended not to notice his threatening demand for money. After all, when you tumble into such a decrepit beggar status as a young Puerto Rican junkie that you cannot get hired anymore as a steerer for the local, Dominican-owned, street-level heroin syndicates, all that remains is your aggressive pride in the face of white junkies. Only the very hardest-core losers cannot get hired on the street today given the artificially tightened market for street-level drug sellers ever since North America's media and politicians discovered the drug problem. The increased police sweeps have effectively hiked dealer wages and profits.

I always wonder how a broken down addict like the man harassing us is able to scrape together sufficient money to maintain his mind and body wasted on the heroin, crack, wine, and whatever else he is nickel and diming into his blood stream. As if to further prove his worthlessness, the beggar/hustler forgot all about his pride and contradicted the logic for why he was getting angry at us in the first place by once again putting out his hand, begging for change to "make a bag", claiming all he needed was another "50 cent" to reach the even ten dollars that a minimum sized glassine packet of heroin costs in New York City. Mikey reached into his pocket and came up with a measly nickel and I tried to do the same but instead clumsily pulled out a subway token further confirming my wealthy, outsider status.

Mikey and I passed the police car and began walking more slowly, no longer sure where we should continue our search for heroin--dope, dee, manteca, tecata, heh-Ron, hah-Ron, hah-row-in. Where to go in that two degree temperature, under a brand new rain, with money in our pockets, but no "product", and the streets "stupid hot" [rife with police]? Imagine, to top this all off, being "sick" i.e. craving a fix like Mikey with his body decomposing under a violent flu's aches and pains and a brain's anxious depression irrespective of the coughing pneumonia lurking underneath his immediate need for drugs.

Wham bam through this nightmare lost moment, a beam of help and hope rebounds out to us from another one of the darker corners of the street--as it always does in moments like this. That is the magic of New York City's inner-city streets. They have infinite potential. Out of nowhere, an emaciated woman, hiding behind a defaced pillar of the old school building, just

barely out of earshot of the police car idling on the corner, whispers "Sun Shine at 114th in the Park".

We did not dare pause lest she too demand spare change. In fact, both of us pretended not to hear her. The poor woman was probably even sicker than Mikey, hanging out there craving crack on a junkie's wet corner besieged by police and begging for help. In fact, she was begging passersby for the favor of giving them three dollar blow jobs. One such lost 19 year old "girl" had actually beseeched me a few weeks earlier in the elevator of the Jefferson Houses projects in a deep hoarse voice "Oh please! Please let me suck you off for 2 dollars! I promise you I'll even swallow it." I awkwardly apologized for turning her down as if denying a casual favor to an acquaintance.

I was not even quite sure Mikey had heard the crack harpy or that I had even really heard her except that before I knew it we were on our way down First Avenue to Jefferson Park walking fast, confident and with purpose--it is a special drug-addict-going-to-cop, almost skipping, walk. What junkies used to call "taking care of business"⁵. Once again Mikey slipped into his smooth hustle mode, pretending that he was leading the way as if he knew the scene and as if the crack prostitute had not told us where to go. After all, it was kind of hard to justify earning \$20 worth of heroin if he provided no service. Or maybe his desperate ego just craved being the leader in control at least some of the time.

Arriving at the Park's entrance and relieved to see the telltale bustle of junkies frantically copping, Mikey asked me for the money to buy his two bags. This time I refused. Last week I had let him walk around the corner in broad daylight with a 20 dollar bill of mine to cop under the same conditions i.e., he was sick and was going to take me to a shooting gallery. Instead he had run off claiming that the cops had chased him. So this time I held onto my 20 dollar bill and walked right into the pool of junkies waiting to purchase. I was determined not to get ripped off yet again by Mikey, preferring the risk of getting beaten down by a sick junkie or arrested in a sudden police sweep. The warpath sweeps of the new mayor's highly moralized narcotics drive has increased to three days the wait in the "bullpens" prior to arraignment before a New York City judge. Seventy two hours is certainly long enough for plenty of gang rapings and beatings of lone white -boys--given that whites represent merely eight percent of New York City's inmates.

The steerer had us wait single file along a chain link fence at the far end of the playground. I was relieved, it was well organized; everyone was orderly; and there were no grungy self-appointed steerer/beggar/prostitutes to confuse matters. This was strictly "a place of business". Almost a dozen of us were fidgeting impatiently asking one another "have you tried it?"

Is it good? Does it work? How long ago did you do it?" Reassured only by "Eso te arregla." [This will fix you.] The dude behind me started complaining 'cause the two folks in the front of the line being "served" were taking too long. They were buying two bundles and were slow in counting packets and money. (In each bundle there are 10 packets worth \$10 each.) Someone else complained that they should have a separate line for folks buying bundles.

On 117th street at busy hours they set up one line for individual junkies buying for their habits and another line for big timers buying serious stashes. The steerers call out, "Who's here for a bundle or more... bundles, bundles, bundles over here!" The rest of us in the low-down, cheap, budget junkie line just wait our turn like undistinguished Hoi Polloi. Sometimes they only sell bundles. They shout at you, "Bundles only! Bundles only!" as you pause at the coping spot looking for "Who's working? Who's holding?". This obliges the mass of sickly junkies who can only afford 2 or 3 packets at the most to mill about waiting for the syndicate to "open" a retail line. First a steerer appears and starts shouting at people to line up "single file! Single file! Come on! Come on!" The junkies literally sprint up to the man announcing the good news, jostling one another for a position sometimes even knocking the steerer over. At this point, the steerer invariably gets mad and threatens not to sell anything till the line is orderly. He (sometimes it is a she) chides the junkies like unruly kids until even the expectant junkies in the line start mumbling to one another "Come on! Line up! Chill out! Come on! Hold steady!" One Sunday afternoon in a playground in the South Bronx, I saw the steerer jump on top of a picnic table above a crowd of about twenty-five eager junkies yelling at them disgustedly to "Get orderly!"

Once order is restored out saunters the pitcher who pulls up next to the shouting steerer repeating over and over in a lower voice, "How many? How many? Have your money ready" Often the pitcher will all of a sudden appear at the back of the line in order to punish the greedier customers who had pushed their way to the front. At other times a second pitcher runs out and starts selling to the back of the line so that the line splits in half. Just before midnight, this past New Year's Eve, in front of the school district's offices at P.S. 155, they were only selling whole bundles but there were so many individual junkies milling about anxiously that a white woman tried to get a group of us to pool our money together to buy a bundle. No one trusted each other enough and we had to wait for the steerers to come out and organize a retail line for single "bags". That New Year's night the "counts" were oversized; almost double the usual size. I had thought it might be a sort of New Year's eve present but a couple of experienced junkies dismissed it as an accident, "The baggers were probably high and careless."

But tonight, the obnoxious kvetcher behind me turned out to be right. After serving three more customers, the "pitcher" sure enough ran out of product. There were only three people ahead of me when he stepped away and along with the dozen or so folks behind me, I patiently kept my place in line. As school kids we would have won brownie points from our home-room teacher for our behavior. These high school--and even junior high school--drop-outs all must have been labelled with serious "attitude problems". Most had probably been segregated into Special Education programs for the mentally and emotionally "disabled", but here on the street as hurting junkies they proved easily capable of enduring arbitrary discipline with polite demeanor. While we waited, the pitcher went back about fifty meters into the playground and huddled in the darkness with two other guys--the runners. They picked up the money and delivered more drugs obviously more paranoid that one of us might try to hold them up than they were scared of the cops. Meanwhile one of the lookouts came over and bossed us around uselessly, shooing away two onlookers, including Mikey. "This is a place of business, if you ain't buying get going. Come on come on! Here it's buy and fly!, Buy and fly!" At this point rather than acting as a lookout he was doubling as a guard, asserting control over the crowd, distracting it, and getting advance warning lest any of us should greedily think of engineering a stick-up.

Someone had walked up with umbrellas in the drizzle to take advantage of this huddle of exceptional buying-power offering little, cute, bright blue foldable umbrellas for, "Only 2 dollahs; 2 dollahs. For the little lady at home. Take a look. These is 17 dollahs in the store." Someone actually bought one but once again the lookout/guard brusquely shooed the hawker away much as the hostile Palestinian owner of the pizza parlor around the corner from me chases out smelly, homeless, wino/addict types when they come in and try to hawk something they stole or picked out of the garbage. So who says East Harlem's economy is not dynamic? Or that blacks and Puerto Ricans lack the "entrepreneurial urge!" All this selling and buying and hustling and hyping was happening at around 12:00 pm and under a cold March rainy drizzle. Fistfuls of money flowing among skinny sick men in scuffed up sneakers seeking psychic relief despite the Census Bureau's statistics boasting that this park is surrounded by some of the nation's highest poverty rates, public assistance dependency rates and generalized misery.

The pitcher finally came back with the warning: "This is it! This is the last bundle. After this there's no more. Get what you need now!" People behind me groaned yet again in anxiety. Through the powerless pitch of their voices crept a threatening tone--almost like a reflex. I guess that is the story of their lives from age one and a half on up: The most effective way to get what you most desperately need is with at least a hint of aggressive threat, especially if what you need affords unrespected

pleasure versus total body and emotional pain. The next thing I knew I had joined in the chorus of groans and aggressive, sighing complaints and disdainful "tsk-tsking" and "oh maan-ing!" because the scrawny looking guy in the front of the line was counting out a big wad of ten dollar bills, threatening once again to empty the "house". There must have been 15 or so of us lined up along the fence separating us from the pitcher: "Come on man hurry up. Save some for me. What's the matter with this nigger? Don't buy 'em all. All's I need is two!" A false sense of safety crept into me standing in the freezing drizzle pushing midnight in Jefferson Park 114th street and First Avenue. Before I knew it the seller was asking me through the chain link fence "How many? without even looking into my eyes just staring into his fistful of tiny rectangular semi-opaque glassine plastic packets with a pink ink stamp, "Sun Shine" loud and clear covered over by just the right amount of scotch tape to prove the bag had not been "tapped"⁶.

I thrust the twenty dollar bill through the chain link with an appropriately curt "two" and took the packets without inspecting the stamp to "fly" in relief to Mikey, who despite the steerer/guard's earlier admonishments was still standing only ten steps away, practically holding his breath. Still paranoid about the cops, I tucked the packets under my belt in a doubled over fold of my shirt trying to make it look like I was fumbling with my fly rather than stashing narcotics, just in case they might be watching from a building roof above with see-in-the-dark binoculars or--more to the point--just in case some hawk-eyed "sick" junkie decides to take off this skinny white-boy who is obviously not a "Dee Tee" [undercover detective] after all.

With dope clearly visible in the light at the end of the tunnel, Mikey became a new man, full of confidence, energy, and business-like efficiency. Shoulders rolling moving once again with the speed and purpose of junkies "taking care of business" we hurried uptown. I almost had to skip to keep up. He made sure I was aware that I was going to have to pay 2 dollars to enter the shooting gallery "even if you don't shoot up."

By now we were cutting through a rubble field that covered most of an entire city block on 121-122nd streets between First and Second avenues, opposite the Taino towers, a 2,000 family conglomeration of four high-rise Federal housing projects⁷. Smack dab in the middle of the block on the uptown side there was a big, abandoned, five story tenement building with a gaping hole in its backside. Once again practically without breaking stride, Mikey hopped eagerly across the wreckage, down an excavation pit that might have been the caved-in steps to the basement, and then back up to the dark gaping hole in the wall, ducking his head to squeeze on through.

The entrance was a jagged, unevenly broken hole smashed out of a solid brick building wall. Straightening ourselves up in the dark of what was probably once the back corner of the lobby, Mikey warned me not to put my foot through a gaping hole where a marble slab had cracked and fallen through into the basement ten feet below. He also whispered something like, "Remember you're my brother" reminding me, once again, that my white skin automatically relegated me to a police-undercover-pariah status on the street. I protested with an "Aww, come on make me a cousin at least". But I guess he was right, "All whites look alike. We might as well be brothers."

Above me I could vaguely make out the black shape of the charred remains of a stairway but Mikey did not give me time to admire, or even to let my eyes get adjusted to the darkness. In fact he did not even pause to belabor my sibling status. Instead he hopped excitedly, still in his junkie mode of I-am-about-to-get-a-shot-of-two-bags-of-dope-that-my-body-is-hurting-for right into the shadows to our left and up to another gaping hole in the exposed brick wall to what had once been a ground floor apartment. If his adrenaline was pumping as hard as mine, it was strictly in anticipation of ecstasy not of terror. He was craving relief and was about to get it, easily transcending the taboo precincts of America's apartheid with a lumpen celebration of joy.

Before I knew it I was hearing a knock and, "It's me Mikey. White Mikey. With a friend." I even had the time to be relieved that he had said I was a friend rather than a brother or a cousin as I too ducked under the overhanging bricks and then slithered sideways around the door-sized plywood slab blocking the cracked, brick-wall entrance. Almost immediately I forgot about being nervous; about having to explain my identity; and I forgot about having to justify that I was not a cop or a junkie because the manager of the gallery--"Doc"--was overjoyed at having two new customers--be they white or black. Furthermore, In the logic of lumpen hustling, Doc was intent on making me feel comfortable. Presumably he was building the potential of a new, long-term victim relationship. He introduced himself right away with a warm, "Welcome to my place", and immediately wooed me into one of the four chairs by the table in the middle of the room cluttered by drug debris. A vague suggestion of warmth was emanating from a sputtering fire on the floor at the far end of the room.

Mikey was not needing or paying attention to any introductions. He was so intent on his upcoming shot of heavenly relief that he had already picked up a spoon from the table and stretched out his hand to me requesting the dope, while simultaneously telling Doc that he did not need the "house needle" before Doc had even offered it to him. I imagine he was salivating by now, his body sweating and throwing farts in anticipatory excitement. I defensively pulled out the four,

crumpled, single dollar bills I had ready in my pocket and lay them out on the table next to where Doc was standing, but he was already all smiles.

Shooting Dope--and Coke

The table was littered with an entangled mess of discarded glassine heroin envelopes and plastic baggie coke packets. Doc was asking what we had bought, telling us (without even waiting for an answer) the brand names of what was good that night--DOA, Rambo, Lambada, and Pure Energy[®]--and what was "open", and where the cops were harassing. We added our bit of information to his pool of logistical knowledge to be imparted to the next customer: "Kickin's open on 117th but is crazy hot; and Sun Shine in Jefferson Park's just closed." I was sort of disappointed that our last two hours running after ecstasy could be summed up in less than a sentence.

I was sitting by then but had not yet figured out what the two other bundled, huddled shapes were on the other side of the table when there was another knocking on the plywood plank "door" and "Slim" and a friend "Flex" walked in shaking off the freezing drizzle and stamping their feet as if entering a warm cozy welcoming home. I would have believed them had they stretched out their arms and sighed, "Ahh, home sweet home at last". In fact, caught up in the welcoming atmosphere I sort of stood up reflexively and had to hold myself back from sticking out my hand for a formal French shake. I was hardly even surprised when Slim walked past me to the last two free chairs, talking casually to me as if he knew me well. He was complaining that they had "run out" just two customers after me right when he was supposed to be "served next". It was the fault of the "small dude" behind me who had bought too many.

It took me a few more seconds to realize that I had earned Slim's friendly, complaining familiarity on the Sun Shine line along the chain link fence. He had been one of the voices rasping and threatening each time someone bought more than a couple of packets. Slim had been left stranded without his "cure". But he had picked up something else on 120th and First Avenue where he'd also met Flex who was by now sitting next to him taking out his works and dumping the precious powdered contents of fresh packets of "DOA" into a waiting kitchen spoon in concentrated anticipation.

Doc was asking Mikey if he needed a tie. I had not even seen Mikey fill his syringe with water from out of the topless plastic jug that lay under the table or evacuate this same water into the little pile of white powdered dope at the bottom of his spoon hanging wedged over the edge of the table, or heat it over the candle to make sure every last bit had dissolved, or throw in

a tiny ball of cigarette filter to trap particles as he drew his medicine back into the syringe. Shit! I had been warned by an AIDS-outreach worker to watch how the junkies in New York share their dirty water. Once again, the Federal government's multi-million dollar AIDS outreach message to intravenous drug users of "Don't share the spike" is inadequate because shooting galleries have no running water, electricity or clean containers. Addicts end up cleaning out their bloodied syringes in the same receptacles that they draw water from and they share their "cookers" (spoons for dissolving the heroin) and "cottons" (filters or pinches of real cotton swabs to trap undissolved particles). They literally shoot water pink with the blood residues of the previous half dozen injectors.

I barely noticed Mikey's impatient refusal of Doc's offer to hold his "tie" while he unrolled his shirt sleeve to expose a chunky white forearm with a long line of red prick marks. Before I had time to chastise myself for having missed out on observing the preparation part, Mikey had practically finished shooting up. He flexed his fist a few times to get the veins to pop out and then hit a vein pretty far up towards his wrist artery, just beyond where the last red pock mark had been left from previous injections. Once the needle was two or three millimeters or so below the skin he pulled back the stopper with his thumb to make sure blood flooded the syringe's chamber. This indicates that the needle tip is squarely inside the vein and has not pierced right through, or rolled off into surrounding tissue. If a shooter gets careless and wiggles too much slipping the needle out or through the vein then sometimes the surrounding fatty tissue balloons up into a painful bruise, and worse yet the expectant junkie will miss the initial rush of ecstasy--or relief depending upon the junkie's habit and the amount of dope being shot--when the precious melted heroin successfully deposited in a racing blood vessel pulses its way within seconds up the arm, through the heart and on into the brain to hit a bull's eye. Indeed within seconds, without hardly even pausing, Mikey was rolling his shirt back down, sitting back to appreciate the fruits of the past two hours or so of running around hustling me in the rain for two bags of dope and a free session in the gallery. I could see he was relieved. He had not been beat; the product was not "whack". For once he had done something that did not need to be followed up with a complaint. He was almost surprised, nodding towards me and humbly murmuring "T's'all right. Yeah, t's'all right."

As Slim and Flex loaded up their syringes with swift efficient hand motions, Mikey was already coughing deeply again drawing the conversation onto his lungs and health. I piped in assertively to Doc and to one of the amorphous forms under a blanket across the table from me about how they should explain to Mikey how one can qualify for indigent status at the emergency room at Metropolitan Hospital to get treated for free. Doc

explained that he had already "run all that by" Mikey several times in the past during previous illnesses but that Mikey was "hard headed" and "Just don't want to listen." Mikey, of course, had no intention of taking care of himself until his pneumonia/tuberculosis laid him flat on his back, thereby interfering categorically with his ability to get high.

Before I knew it, Mikey was out the door with an "I'll-see-you-later." Presumably he was worried about my remembering the \$20 he had hustled from me last week; or else, he might have been avoiding the risk of being asked to pay another two dollars for staying too long in the shooting gallery; or perhaps, he was just being common-sensical about the real dangers of hanging out for an unnecessarily long time in an East Harlem shooting gallery, white-boy that he was--decrepit or not. More to the point, he had already hustled the only potential victim he had access to in this space.

Maybe I was supposed to all of a sudden get nervous at being the only lonely white because everyone around the table noticed with surprise Mikey's "abandoning" me. Someone commented about how despite everything Mikey was "alright", and they quickly reassured me not to take it personally; everyone had to be careful with Mikey. One could not ever try to "tell Mikey what to do for his own good"--pneumonia, tuberculosis, or no pneumonia. I remained oblivious to any need for me to get nervous and their comments followed a righteous and boring tract. In some kind of expression of companionship and solidarity with me, they began berating Mikey as if they were wise old matrons full of common sense scolding a child who forgot to wear a warm hat on a cold day. They had to make sure I realized they were on par with me but they also had to be feeling good about themselves to be able to marshal such a tone of voice. I was completely comfortable by now.

Perhaps because of my obvious intention of settling in for a while, and perhaps because I was not the standard fare of white trash that once in a blue moon stumbles into the gallery, Doc stood up precipitously to clean off the table busily. Even if he did not really believe my claim of "writing a book about street life" he wanted to spiff the scene up. With deft, and once again decidedly matron-like household skills, he scraped up the wax spilled by the candles, swept off the half-dozen match tips, miniature ziplock baggies, cocaine foil wrappers, crack vials and tops of crack vials, and actually caught the trash in his hand which he then threw into the fire rather than carelessly dumping it all onto the floor. He then carefully picked up the empty heroin envelopes stacking them almost gingerly in a neat pile in front of him. He picked up the open hypodermic (last used by Flex) carefully capping it (but not washing it out with bleach!) and laying it strategically in the center of the table for the next customer. He even fumbled out a foulish looking damp rag to

wipe the residual dust, blood drops, and other dubious wettish waste off the table. All through this, in an obvious attempt to welcome, reassure, and keep on checking me out he was happily mumbling about how he was trying to run a "decent place" and that just because of external appearances--like "not having no electricity"--it did not mean he was gonna let things get dirty. And that after all he ran a "classy joint" [place]. Indeed the table looked almost miraculously clean and orderly after he had picked at and wiped up the past several hours of injecting. Pushing his righteous household matron trip to the limit Doc even began gently reproaching Flex for not cleaning up the pack of litter in front of him. But he made no mention of his having carelessly left his possibly HIV positive blood in the unsheathed house needle on the table in front of us. Slim had not hit yet he was mixing some cocaine into his spoon of dissolved heroin to make a "speedball"--the contradictory combination of stimulant-cum-depressant that has become the rage among heroin addicts ever since the price of cocaine dropped precipitously in the late 1980s. Flex was after the same speedball high but he was "chasing it" by "stemming"⁹ his cocaine in the form of crack immediately after shooting up his heroin instead of combining powder cocaine with the heroin in his cooker to inject it all simultaneously. (Combining crack with shooting heroin provides essentially the same speedball high as shooting the more traditional powder heroin/coke mixture.)

By now Doc had sat down and was busy concentrating--almost with his tongue hanging out--hunched over a pile of a half-dozen empty heroin packets. He was gently scraping the sides of the glassine packets with a flat-edge razor recuperating the dregs of heroin flecks stuck to the sides. He was probably scraping off a lot of plastic--or whatever it is that glassine envelopes are made of----at the same time. Those plastic particles must wreck havoc in his lungs' capillaries. A doctor friend of mine told me that Metropolitan Hospital, East Harlem's municipal facility has diagnosed a condition called "heroin lung" whereby the lungs of elderly junkies become completely clogged up with all the garbage, cuts, and impurities that are added to the heroin they have been shooting everyday. The lung apparently acts as a strainer. That is where our body's capillaries are most numerous and at their smallest so it is where particles and impurities jam up. Imagine injecting three or four times a day, 365 days a year for 20 or 30 or even 50 years as in Doc's case.

After a few minutes of expert smooth scraping--this obviously being something Doc does several times a day, every day--Doc had collected quite a veritable little spoon-sized pile of what looked like nice, clean, white heroin from the sides of the gallery's tossed out bags. He looked kind of happy and relaxed, maintaining a steady stream of talk in a gentle voice, a happy image of recycling and energy efficiency. He looked almost nerdy because of the care he took in scraping clean the bags,

like a primary school child painstakingly touching up a plastic model airplane that has extra glue spilled over the edges of some of its connecting joints.

Slim and Flex across the table were starting to "conversate" excitedly because Flex's hit of heroin had been good and Slim who had not yet injected was holding the same stuff in his spoon so he was guaranteed a good high too. He had just finished heating up his coke/heroin concoction on one of the candles in front of him. You are not supposed to have to heat up coke in a cooker because real cocaine dissolves easily in water at room temperature. But these days because of the way it is cut, rumor has it that it is safer to heat the stewy mess up until it boils in your spoon to make sure all the crap compressed with it also dissolves evenly. Once Slim had loaded his works, I expected him to take off his jacket and roll up his sleeve or at worst drop his jeans and search for a clean vein below the knees. But instead Slim arched back his neck and called over to one of the forms huddled against the far wall under a mound of covers lying on an old mattress beyond the flickering shadows. It turned out to be "Pops", an old man, weaker and more bent over than Doc. Pops had not done much moving up until then, but at Slim's beck he jumped up a little too eagerly. I guess he was expecting a drug tip; or maybe he was just trying to be helpful and was tired of being taken for granted; or maybe he was scared he'd be thrown out if he proved himself to be good for nothing. Pop started massaging Slim's jugular. He maintained Slim's loaded syringe poised up above his head in his other hand carefully out of the way, sort of like a Statue of Liberty's torch--a made-in-America version, pulsing with blood, flesh and HIV positivity. Indeed, everyone in the room was at least a sixth-generation descending American.

I tried--and succeeded--to just sort of ignore this spectacle, taking it with the flow as if I thought it was totally normal that a shriveled old man would jab a syringe slam damn into the neck of another relatively young man's neck. I could not quite block out the sight of the old man pulling back the hypodermic's plunger to make sure he had "hit" i.e., that blood was spurting into the syringe's chamber with Slim kibitzing directions: "That's right; keep steady; you're in. Steady now; that's right; that's right. Go ahead!" Finally Slim was high as a kite like everyone else around the table except he was grumbling a bit to the old man about how when you are really good at "hitting someone" you can inject into the neck without making it burn so much. The old man was kind of proud of his successful hit¹⁰.

Slim zoomed up high and away on the initial coke rush of his speedball mixture. A wave of urgent conversation burst out of him as he recounted yet once again which street corner had good heroin; where he had seen cops; who had been arrested lately; and

why so many people on the street lacked so much common sense and did such stupid things. Flex almost in conjugation with the coke rush cresting the first wave of Slim's speedball, mellowed out on the heroin flow of his heroin-cum-crack high. The complementing stages of their highs welded into one of those warm, easily flowing talkative moods and they babbled away. Flex's heroin bonhomie was earnestly listening to Slim's hyped-up coke intensity--A tide of fraternal bliss riding on their hearts. They were happy to be alive; proud of themselves; and excited by their momentarily deep brotherly friendship.

For some reason this either irritated Doc or else their see-through childlike appreciation of one another embarrassed him, because he stood up once again and moved his chair around to the left away from the table motioning me to "come sit by me." Bright-eyed and eager, he protectively but also pseudo-threateningly patted the space by his side inviting me to "converse" with him in confidence and "pay no mind" to our speedballing buddies. He complained about the loudness of their chatter and the fact that no one had bothered to clean up the droplets of still warm blood that had spurted from Slim's neck onto the table. In fact Slim had not even sheathed or stashed his works. I was so impressed by Doc's concern lest I lose respect for him and his gallery because of any inconsequential chatter or immature behavior that I did not even stop to wonder how much HIV virus was alive and unwell wriggling about in the puddles of blood and open needle just centimeters away from me discarded so ecstatically on the table. Doc kept insisting that he kept a "good place"; and that he did not want his guests (me) to get the "wrong impression"; and that "just because there ain't no electricity here" it "don't mean folks shouldn't clean up after themselves"; and finally that he was especially appreciative of patrons (like me) who were tidy. They were always welcomed back he told me with a smug smile that punctuated Slim and Flex's exclusion and my inclusion.

The two speedballers paid Doc no mind. They did not hear him pulling rank on them or "dissing" them to a white-boy. To segregate me even more from the babbling speedballers, and to assure my full attention Doc pulled out a packet of coke stashed in gum-wrapper foil. There was not all that much coke in it--perhaps a "nickel's" worth [five dollars]; or else it was the arbitrary payment someone had left in lieu of the two dollar house fee for the privilege of shooting up. "Go ahead take it; it's for you. You like cocaine don't ya?" I thanked him, touched that he had trustingly thrust the foil over to me out of his own reach so that it was under my total control. Had I been a "thirsty motherfucker", I could have sniffed the whole load up without so much as negotiating the price. Nevertheless, a little concerned that my not being a drug addict might look weird in this setting, but also genuinely proud of the fact that he could tell that I was not the kind of thirsty, penniless garbage-head

who you cannot trust with anything, I turned down his offer explaining that I was not really "into coke" and that I had already spent all my money. Retrospectively I am now aware that I was being naive. Doc probably wanted me to sniff up the coke greedily without first specifying a price so that he could then overcharge me since he--not me--was the one capable of mobilizing violence in this setting. Nevertheless, Doc was almost acting like he was going to give the blow to me insisting that my alleged pennilessness did not matter; I could just give him any amount of money "or change" I had left in my pocket. I did throw out a dollar to him but pushed the "blow" back in front of him next to his half filled spoon of heroin shavings from the glassine coated envelope. He paused as if holding back from dumping the coke into the spoon. His pause was long enough for someone to knock on the plywood slab in front of the "door" and to hear a voice saying, "It's me, Shorty". He stood up immediately to rearrange the plywood plank because the wind outside had picked up and the temperature had dropped. The wind's whistling felt terrible, boding badly for the rest of these folks' evening, but I seemed to be the only one to worry about it.

Shorty did not even seem to notice me; sitting down by my side he immediately settled down to business. He opened two packets of heroin--I forget what brand--grabbed the syringe and then noticing the open foil of coke by Doc's pile of heroin shavings to my left, he stared at it long enough for Doc to offer him some. But this time, Doc offered it in a distinctly different tone from the careless, "generous" way he had proposed it to me only a minute earlier. He was defensive in advance about how much Shorty was going to be willing to pay. I was almost embarrassed by the blatant difference. Discrimination is not limited to the Ivy League world of legitimate employment. It is alive and well in the underground economy; "Whitey" gets special treatment no matter where he grovels and how it conflates with his being hustled.

They started bargaining: Shorty complaining about how little money he had, and Doc getting nervous that Shorty was trying to substitute the two dollar house fee for a corner of this coke, because Shorty was saying something about only having two dollars. Things got tense, so tense that Slim on the other side of the table who was still in the initial ecstatic acceleration of the first wave of the coke rush of his speedball high and who was still rapping nonstop with Flex, put his hand over the top of his eyes as if shielding them from an imaginary sun and pushed his head downward and inward towards the table and towards Flex--all the while flashing a subtle, worried grin at me. Although he occasionally played peek-a-boo to gauge Shorty's and Slim's demeanor, Slim wanted to make very clear that he was not a party to whatever argument might be brewing across the table. Although Slim was still smiling, there was clearly fear in his face.

Perhaps a tinge of paranoia had crept in with his coke rush, as it so often does. At least, I hoped it was paranoia that was troubling Slim because I was sitting vulnerably between Doc and Shorty. The problem with so much cheap cocaine coursing through everyone's veins is that you can never be sure when a mild paranoid psychosis will take control of someone's common sense and persuade them that you have "dissed" them irreparably.

Slim's eye-shielding self-effacement was a powerfully effective and obvious form of conflict resolution for shooting-gallery frequenters where the often irritating "upper" effects of the cheap coke and crack being consumed clashes violently with the soothing "downer" head of heroin to make the tension and desperation almost visible in the air like electric flashes. Shorty finally pulled out three crumpled bills, throwing them on the table and waiting for Doc to acknowledge. Doc eased his expression and the tension was instantly reduced. Shorty was now playing with the moment, pretending to be a little angry at Doc for having made such a big issue of this scene. In fact, Shorty was the loser; he could have gotten away with less. Being a regular frequenter and sort of a friend, Shorty almost has the right to use the gallery for free. Furthermore, Doc's "over-reaction" to the possibility that Shorty might take the coke, pay two dollars and forfeit his house fee revealed how tenuous Doc's control over the scene really was. And what the hell could Doc have done? There was nothing short about Shorty; in fact, he was a "stocky motherfucker", much more solid and heavier than your typical emaciated--at best disheveled and wiry--shooting gallery junkie. He had recently been released from jail where he has pumped his muscles in the weight room and had never missed his three meals a day.

Anyhow, Doc let Shorty slide with the coke for a dollar and I was even more surprised that he let Shorty help himself to everything that was left in the foil after first knocking off just a little corner of the powder into his own pile of steadily growing heroin/glassine shavings. It saddened me to witness Doc's vulnerability, reminding me of the tenuous survival strategies of the superannuated banana workers on the plantation in Central America where I lived for two years."

More Speedballing

This calm after a storm allowed me to look around the room and into each individual's eyes. The ancient skinny man who had shot Slim up in the jugular--no holds barred in the pursuit of ecstasy--looked almost like an older brother to Doc except that he was self-effacing, shy and polite--sort of like hired help. He had crumpled himself back down in a pile of ragged blankets laid out on an old folded mattress with pieces of scratched and stained clear plastic covering as much of the blankets as possible. I guess it leaked in his corner of the room, or maybe

he used the plastic to trap his body heat. He was curled up in a semi-sitting position and when he saw that I was looking into his eyes he got all nervous and shy; he shuffled his head politely, sort of smiling, and then he nodded with a low mutter to signal agreement to what Doc was saying--yet once again--about this being a friendly, humble, "clean joint", with "good people", and that there was no reason we should not be able to keep the table "tidy". Through my failing concentration, I heard Doc say something about the good old-fashioned folks from around "Carolina"--reminding me of the ravages of the black rural/urban migrant stream washed up in New York.

Taking advantage of the break in tension and Doc's friendliness towards me, I stood up, stretching to get a better look across the table at the over-bundled elderly women who had periodically been letting out deep guttural moans of delight. I never found out her name. She had the deep phlegmy voice of a newly-shot-up, "righteous dope fiend". Every few minutes at unpredictable intervals, she would release a drawn out Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, her eyes lidded three-quarters shut in relaxed appreciation. When you took the noise out of the cold damp darkness it became an impressive expression of true ecstasy; the life-appreciating sound of someone clearing their throat in surprised awareness upon discovering how truly happy, secure, and protected they felt; or--if you take it even more out of context--it was the androgynous sound of an orgasm. She was huddled up for warmth, on a heroin nod, but with a crack stem balanced like a cigarette between her fingers. She had a kerchief wrapped around most of her head and much of her face so that it was impossible to tell her age except that it had to be over 40. Her almost obscene involuntary groans of pleasure were comfortably ignored by everyone else. No one even giggled at her unpredictable interruptions no matter how loud, clear, or proto-erotic they sounded.

Every now and then she would come to a wider awake consciousness and interject a few gentle words in her low-phlegmed junkie's rasp. She was obviously right on top of our conversation because her comments were always on the mark. She also occasionally fumbled with her crack pipe, filling it with some of her white pebbles of compressed energy and lit up. Her occasional hits of crack did not really wake her up because whatever junk she had shot earlier was "smoking" in her veins. As if to demonstrate the speedball's characteristically precarious balance, whenever I thought she was about to pass out cold to the world, she would add a few more words to the conversation. These momentary bursts of energy were from the crack rushes of her speedball: in and out of contradictory tides of chemical exaltation.

Her most substantial contribution to the conversation was an interrupted response to my question to Doc about how long the

shooting gallery had been operating and how long they had all been living there. Perhaps to prove her legitimacy the mummified woman-in-ecstasy confirmed Doc's answer about the old-age and stability of the gallery's establishment: "Yes that's a fact. And ain't it something! We been gettin' straight every day. I know its hard to believe but its the truth. Keepin' warm, and staying straight every day." Doc, of course, was also pleased with himself, and his set-up and he nodded emphatic agreement to her overwhelmingly positive assessment of their past year's effective survival strategy. What else are 50 year old plus junkies to be proud of in East Harlem's abandoned buildings? It certainly beats being the emaciated teenage harpy who steered us to Jefferson park, or the burnt-out, low-down, crack-smoking junkie in his late 20s who had almost fought Mikey for treating him like a beggar.

By now Shorty had long since shot up. Trying to broaden my contacts and to make polite social conversation, I asked him if the coke was any good. He merely nodded something about it being "decent". He did not want to admit publicly--like nobody ever does--that the quality of a just bought drug--especially in front of the seller--is anything special. But he did look awfully happy. It turned out to be the dope that he especially appreciated because before we even had time to get into a conversation Shorty was up and gone without a word, only to reappear ten minutes later with two more bags of the same dope (I forget the brand name) repeating the whole process but with no coke added this time. His earlier injection of two bags had merely been a test of the quality of the new brand to make sure he was not going to be ripped off. Shorty is the cautious type, planning out his strategies well in advance and astutely marshalling his limited cash. Imagine the frustrating deception when your aching body and throbbing psyche is expecting instant relief but instead is treated to an injection of a ten dollar bag of powdered milk and baby laxative (mannitol) .

Doc scolded and teased Shorty for returning to shoot up more, something about having no business having any more money after what "went down earlier", and also about how he should not be using up his "last dollars" in "such a hurry". Indeed, Shorty had used the wording "last dollars" in his previous confrontation--or was it merely a street-coded negotiation--with Doc over paying for the coke versus paying for the house fee. The joking was cut short, however, because Shorty's second fix sent him way over the speedball balance into a deep heroin nod. His head drooped like a suddenly wilted flower to within centimeters of the candle flame he had just cooked his dope up on. He was balancing himself in that very special junkie nod: pausing languorously at the door to relaxation but never making it anywhere; not even falling over, somehow maintaining a useless balance.

Slim and Flex, meanwhile, had long since turned their attention entirely to their crack stems repeatedly ferreting out additional stashes of crack vials squirrelled away in the recesses of their pockets, sleeves, and hems. They had gloriously lit up little pebbles, chips and smidgens of the stuff and then re-exploded into bursts of happy chattering. They sounded like a pair of long lost gossips, finally reunited after several weeks of separation. In contrast, in crack houses where crack is smoked without the benefit of an underlying stabilizing dose of heroin there is none of this happy banter. Instead the smokers almost immediately fly into cocaine overdoses and start snarling at one another with paranoid delusions i.e., they "bug out" and get "open" and "thirsty"

As if to punctuate and contrast the alternating coke rushes and heroin flows of the speedball, the formless older woman in rags across the table was periodically groaning in happiness. It was almost as if she was an orchestra conductor leading the rise and fall of the coke and heroin tides washing through everyone's head. Only Doc and I were making any pretense of acting like stable, sober social beings. The other old man on the mattress in the back corner had long since collapsed exhausted under his blankets and plastic sheets.

Filling his syringe from the grungy water jug lying carelessly under the table, Doc dropped his jeans, shuffled over closer to the fire, squatted by the flames, and shot himself up in one of the veins on the lower part of his leg. The coke part of his speedball mix (remember he had taken a little corner of the coke he sold to Shorty) hit him hard. Wham-bam, he was at full height right above me gesturing excitedly in the middle of a huge conversation like an intellectual on the verge of discovery/appreciation. He fulfilled my worst shooting gallery nightmare/fantasy. He was so high on the initial coke rush of his speedball that he had forgotten about the open needle in his hand which he was waving back and forth while pacing around the room. He even punctuated his more excited remarks to me by jabbing the open needle forward, the blood dripping out the tip into the cold air. I pushed my chair back, gauging his gesticulations carefully.

At sixty four, the coke part of Doc's speedball still leaves him as happy and spritely as a young spring buck in full appreciating of life--for at least a few minutes. His needle-waving enthusiasm was instantly contagious; it spun the entire room into the coke rush part of their individual speedballs. They started "conversating" together as a group, all at once focused together on the same topic rather than being fragmented into their little corners of the room and table depending upon what end of the speedball roller coaster they happened to be coursing. All was well, the dope and the coke were decent tonight.

Settling In

The conversation turned to getting busted, to jail experiences, and to the horrors of methadone addiction¹². Doc had not been arrested since 1980, "knock on wood" he added. Talk focused on the "good old days" before crack. When "addicts were addicts"; and when you could trust your "crimey". Slim gave a long, righteous rap on the lost decency of street hustling. Everyone in the room "hmm-ed" and "ahh-ed" agreement to the terrible tragedy of crack. It sounded like the excited amen-ing of a participatory church except that the faithful were periodically pausing to light up crack stems. It was a straightforward case of middle-aged, doped-out crackheads "dissing" crack and bemoaning the irresponsibility and lack of common sense of today's whippersnapper addicts.

The ebbs and flows of the speedball highs that had been heading towards more dope-dominated nods were wrenched into another excited spurt of physical energy by a sudden invasion of the natural elements--rain, cold and wind. Doc rose to his feet and started a flurry of physical organization, pulling chairs out of the path of drizzle drips invading our ecstatic space and reminding everyone of their fragile homelessness. Outside the late winter drizzle turned to a pouring rain. Once more, Doc waved me over next to him by the fire and away from the drafts and out of the rain. (But once again his kind offer was marred by the same defensively aggressive snarl that dominated the moans and complaints of the hurting addicts waiting on line to buy Sun Shine earlier that night in Jefferson Park when the pitcher ran out of product.) Indeed, in addition to the drizzle, the temperature had also suddenly dropped. Doc busily poked behind me into the rubble-strewn, darkest corner of the gallery that was most exposed to the elements--i.e., drizzle drops and coursing currents--searching for more wood to stoke the fire.

Slim was also up and about but strictly concerned with his own comfort: unfolding his bed just behind the shooting table. His metal cot had been neatly and discreetly laid up against the side wall opposite the door all this time. It was tightly squirrelled away like that of a would-be yuppie's in a much-too-small Manhattan studio that is being shared as an economic favor with a friend who is desperately trying not to be de trop when guests show up for an impromptu Saturday evening nightcap.

Slim was also unfolding a cache of blankets and oversized plastic garbage bags, stolen from the public housing projects opposite us, brushing off the dust and fallen plaster from his sheets. Yes, he even had sheets and a pillow! He pulled out three candles laying them at strategic angles around his bed on a tangle of gas pipes that incongruously jutted out of the brick wall like a futuristic night table. The wall on Slim's side of

the "room" was a yuppie's delight of cleanly exposed bricks. They were stripped down and neatly sanded to a glowing but tastefully-aged, wholesome ceramic red. The plaster and cement stains had long since chipped away or burnt up or dissolved in innumerable floods of rain drops seeping through the burnt-out roof and running down the sides of the walls. Slim pulled out the Sunday comics section of the Daily News folding it into the more convenient quarter-length creases that yuppies on rush-hour trains convert their Wall Street Journals into in order to maximize their precious time. He was carefully preparing for what was obviously his favorite part of the day: a comfortable nightcap while reading cozily in bed under his covers (and his plastic garbage bags). Before settling in, he walked to the far edge of his foldaway cot and carefully wrapped a final, large, clear sheet of plastic with paint splatters on it around the bottom third of his blankets and mattress because it lay directly in the path of some serious drizzle drops.

Slim pulled out his crack pipe loaded with a fresh pile of chips and lay it down on a wider piece of piping side by side to his Bic lighter. He took off his shoes, wrapped his feet in small plastic bags (shopping bags from the one surviving supermarket three blocks away) and snuggled into bed under his candles. After lighting up his pipe, and rustling his paper he was off and away in the privacy of his cocoon. He looked like a cross between a little kid performing sleep rituals and a skinny intellectual trying to get in a last few licks of reading while puffing on the street version of the Ivy League's briarwood pipe.

Doc did not let this scene slip by without meddling. It was obvious, given Doc's earlier preoccupation with candles, that Slim's conspicuous display of burning candles was not going to be accepted passively by the "manager." Doc just came right out and demanded one of Slim's lit candles for the "rest of us". In contrast to the harsh tenor of his earlier purposefully public confrontation with Shorty, over the cost of coke, Doc delivered the ultimatum to Slim in a low voice so as not to embarrass him in front of all of us. I guess Slim has more semi-permanent squatting rights to the gallery--I had not noticed him paying Doc anything for shooting up. The one candle flickering in the middle of the shooting table was dangerously low. (It was the candle that Shorty had almost knocked over with his head after his second injection sent him into a deep nod.) Slim protested gently but when Doc rearranged two of Slim's lit candles at better, more efficient angles on the tangle of gas pipes above his pillow so that they threw a wider arc of light, Slim shut up and settled back under the covers into his comics-and-crack bliss.

Armed with Slim's extra candle, Doc paced around the room looking for the most strategic spot to perch it, reaching high up enough so that it would shed a broader layer of light throughout the whole room. One of his test spots (always on one or another

of the nest of gas pipes criss-crossing the walls) even lit up old-man Pop's barely nodding head way back on the far side of the room wrapped in his gaggle of ragged blankets which were obviously too cold, and which did not have Slim's aura of organized, self-sufficient coziness. Doc stuck the candle to the gas pipe and went back to his seat; but it soon became obvious that the candle was going to burn up prematurely at that particular location. A draft was sending the candle's flame shooting upward. After momentarily contemplating from his seat by the fireplace the dancing light and shadows flung by this high burning flame, Doc asked me--"since you're tall enough"--to test out some other spots above the "door" on another higher up gaggle of old gas pipes.

I jumped up a trifle too eagerly at his request to be useful. I was overjoyed to be incorporated in a less hierarchized manner as a helpful participant in the room's activities. After my third attempt stretching on tiptoes to locate a non-drafty spot for Slim's candle, Doc's expert eye finally selected a twist of gas pipelines where everything was just right: the angle of reflected light would not offend anyone who might be left in or out of the new array of shadows, and the amount of wind blowing on the flame was not excessive. As I was trying to get the molten wax to stay warm enough in the freezing room to stick the candle solidly onto the piping, I wondered why all this precious gas piping--I think the stuff is solid iron because it felt outrageously solid and had not been ripped out of the walls and sold for scrap by hurting junkies. Scrapping copper water pipes and iron gas lines from abandoned buildings is probably the most classic source of junkie income in the inner city.

Doc rewarded my exertions around the candle by expressing all kinds of concern over where I should be sitting to avoid water, wind and get maximum light. Despite his kindly efforts, he was organically incapable of being unconditionally gentle and nice. Once again, within the bossy edginess of his voice, I could hear the street-abused little kid who has suffered too long. A strong tinge of aggression poisoned everything he did or said, even contaminating his attempts to establish a new friendship, "Come on! Move over here! Can't you feel the dripping water?" Street terror always triumphs.

Finally I moved my chair at Doc's insistence and made some kind of annoyed remark as to why someone had not built a "goddam roof" for the room by putting up some sheets of discarded zinc over the rotten beams above us. This did embarrass Doc a bit, especially as he had been busy all evening physically improving and asserting ownership of this wretchedly wet and windy gallery. There was obviously plenty of wood, tin and other such garbage available to plug up the "roof". He countered from where he stood, rummaging in the back of the gallery for more firewood, with a defensive/aggressive warning about how dangerous it was to walk on the rotten beams above; as if only an imprudent ignoramus could even ask such a question.

Heaving a sigh, Doc settled back down next to me by the fire in an easy-chair which was really the front bucket seat of a long-gone car. He started complaining about the awkward size of a big hunk of plywood board that he had dragged into the back corner of the gallery (behind Slim's bed). He was not strong enough to break it up and it would not fit in the fire. Flex who had been somewhat left out of the "conversating" until this point jumped into action. I guess another coke flow from the crack he was smoking was overtaking the ebb of heroin in the precarious balance of his speedball high. Before any of us had time to turn our heads (just right then the rest of the room was settling into relaxed heroin flows down from their coke rushes) he was up on his feet pushing aside the "door" and dragging the plywood board into the "lobby" to whack at it with a gnarled hunk of iron gas-piping.

We immediately all began criticizing his strategy, telling him to reposition the board so that the hunk of marble jutting up from underneath (a broken piece of stair) would cut through from the underside at a more effective angle; or else to jump up and down on the board to crack it first before hitting it; etc.. He did not listen or even pause, just swung harder and harder, sending up huge banging echoes throughout the building. By now we were shouting at him to stop. It was hurting our ear drums because the positioning of the plywood on the protruding step gave out the acoustics of an oversized drum. But Flex just swung faster and harder. Finally someone raised the specter of the police overhearing the racket.

At this point I was scared again. Perhaps it was the mention of the police--I definitely did not want to get picked up in a police-sweep. Their earlier stories--and others I have heard on the streets--of being trapped for three days in an overcrowded prison "bullpen" waiting to be arraigned by an overloaded New York City judge were fresh in my mind. I was also straightforwardly scared of Flex's fury in smashing his hunk of pipe so hard onto the resilient slab of plywood. I happened to be the person sitting closest to the entrance way and I would be the first person in the path of his metal pipe should some kind of paranoid cocaine-psychosis persuade him that I too needed whacking like the uncooperative plywood board. In response to the, by now hostile, street voices hollering over the danger of alerting the police, Flex kept smashing down harder and faster and louder, sweating profusely. The noise echoed through the building, out into the empty lots around us and up over to the lower floors of the high-rise Taino towers.

My adrenaline was starting to pick up. Time again for some serious shooting-gallery-speedballed conflict-resolution. The anxiety over Flex's acting up had pushed aside everyone's heroin highs. They were all starting to gear up on nervous (paranoid) coke energy. Within my own worst case scenario train of thought (I was scared of a bust) I tried changing the focus of attention to another concern of mine by asking over the din of the shouting

and pounding if the cops might not also see the smoke from our fire. To my surprise, Pop, the feeble old man huddled under the covers and plastic sheeting far behind the table against the back wall who I thought had long since nodded out--or died--piped up with a clear and articulate explanation of how the smoke "breaks up long before it reaches the roof". He said it in a scientific styled voice, perhaps imitating my white-intoned, overly cautious manner of phrasing the question. But he was indeed an expert on the subject, being a long-term resident of abandoned buildings with leaking roofs from five stories up.

All of a sudden, as if in another magical moment of conflict-resolution premonition, the oversized plywood board finally shattered. Flex ripped the broken hunk into shreds just the right size for our "fireplace". Sweating and panting he looked up proudly and I was surprised to find that everyone was instantly happy with him again. Some were even praising him for his hard work.

Once again I had misjudged the aggressive street-tone of their voices. In fact they probably had not been mad at any time throughout Flex's pounding. I was a little embarrassed at myself. After all these years on the streets I still have not come to recognize the full nuances of emphasis that distinguish genuine, dangerous anger from normal, emphatic discourse. On the contrary despite their curses and warnings at his stupidity for attracting the police they were happy with Flex's work. None of them except me had ever been close to exploding.

Doc carefully stacked the split wood; Flex replaced the other intact plywood slab that acted as a "door" over the hole in the wall and we all settled back down. It was almost sad to see the physical disarray of Flex's body from his minute and a half exertion. He was panting like a crying baby, perhaps the early signs of a future condition to be diagnosed upon his death as some combination of tuberculosis, pneumonia, and "heroin/crack lung". Indeed, if heroin clogs and cuts your capillaries with its fine white particles, then crack must coat these same lung capillaries with the sticky, thick, black tar-oil with which it also covers crack pipes. I wondered how healthy Flex might have looked as a kid in North Carolina, out by the wood pile, cutting up kindling for his grandmother's stove.

Practically before we had all sat back down to appreciate our newfound peace and revitalized fire, Doc was coke-rushing to his feet. Infected by Flex's obvious energy and sense of community contribution, Doc began organizing "a run" to the store for candles, soda, popcorn, corn chips, candies. The blood coursing through Flex's veins must have kicked extra strength into the coke half of his speedball because he was ready for more action. He was happy to go outside and walk around in the cold drizzle. To my pleasant surprise, Doc also wanted to treat me to a beer. He was taking up a collection for the "groceries" coaxing everyone to contribute--even Slim who was comfortable in bed

under the covers. Doc was effective at it, publicly approaching each person individually for them to cough up their last few nickels. Each time, the amount they were asked to contribute was exactly what we were "short" to be able to buy one last needed item. Doc even argued with me over what kind of beer he was going to treat me to. After begging nickels and dimes from everyone (except me) he insisted that I get the same kind of expensive beer that I had originally come in with, an imported bottle of Heineken. I protested that Flex should just pick up a can of any old cheap American beer, but Doc took this as an insult to his hospitality.

There was a last flurry of juggling to get Shorty who seemed to have been left behind in a heroin nod-down with no coke energy at all, to "make" the final contribution. We were only "45 cent short" of being able to afford an extra pack of cookies. Doc was a model for how to mobilize grumbling, sniffing junkies to fork over petty change. I was flattered when Doc waved me off as I tried to dig into my own pockets for this last contribution. Poor Doc was trying to get the credit for treating me generously like a fancy guest and here I was falling for his hustle and feeling like I too had to throw in my last chump change. Once again he came at me with an involuntary snarl--or at least a serious expression of exasperation--as he ordered me to sit back, take my hands out of my pockets, and accept a Heineken graciously. Here I was ruining his efforts at getting the others to pay for his generosity by trying to pay for part of his present to me.

When Flex finally pulled back the plywood plank and the gust of outside winter air came rushing in, wildly flickering our last few candles, I jumped up to accompany him out the door, bursting to urinate. I was scared to go out there alone, convinced I might be devoured by an oversized rat, fall through to the basement, or be cut to pieces by an errant, thirsty crackhead in search of vulnerable stragglers. Maybe I was just being irrationally scared of the dark. I stepped gingerly through the beam of candle light coming through the door, a little embarrassed about having to deal with something as mundane as a bodily function under these conditions. Nevertheless, I forced myself to take ten steps into the dangerous dark so as not to foul my host's living quarters. I was probably also prudishly worried that I might commit a local cultural faux pas. Under Flex's discreetly embarrassed eye, I cautiously arranged myself along the far end of the former lobby's wall blocking off another side room whose floor had fallen clean through to the basement. I aimed carefully through a jagged crack in the bricks so as to reach antiseptically into the decayed basement below and thereby protect these living and business quarters.

By the time I turned around, Flex had already walked out the back of the building into the rubble field outside leaving me

alone in the lobby. My companions had replaced the plywood plank over the entrance to the gallery. Stranded in the darkness and the cold, surrounded by gaping holes in the floor above a deep basement, I toyed with the idea of panicking. I tried to remember where I had put my feet on the way over, so as not to break my legs in a fall. But I easily nopped back over to the plank; paused cautiously to knock and announce myself the way Mike had done, in case a cocaine-paranoia might overcome someone's speedball and allow the sudden appearance of a white-boy to wrench them into an out-of-control hysteria. I waited for some kind of acknowledgment and then slid through the opening in the plywood's slant across the hole, hardly having to even move it. Once inside I felt much better, safer and warmer by the fire, not to mention physically relieved.

It was not long after Flex's departure before Doc began complaining about how long he had been gone. I thought Doc would be worried about Flex running off with the money--and he probably was--but instead he complained loudly like a crotchety grandfather intimating an almost involuntary touch of good-natured concern, for his wayward grandson who was tarrying on the block after being sent on a household errand. Doc had to shut up soon, however, because Flex returned rickety split, full of energy and purpose. Instead, Doc channelled the rest of his coke-rushed energy to rekindling the fire with more wood splinters from Flex's smashed slab of plywood.

At this point I realized with a jolt that the temperature had dropped even more dramatically; I was so cold that my legs were shaking. There was no escaping the fact that these junkies were going to spend the rest of the night shivering in this freezing cold cell, while I would be returning to a warm bed in a heated home (even though I complain because my crack tenement windows leak cold air and my cheap landlord refuses to raise the heat at night). It felt like a bad dream "reality check" cutting through the anesthesia of the gallery's speedball/heroin high. These skinny needle-pocked wrecks were probably already HIV positive and this temperature was bound to weaken their immune systems just a little bit more. Nevertheless, the candy and potato chips distributed all around the room quickly masked these concerns, giving off instead a temporary aura of happy activity and normality.

The "munchies" spurred another flurry of activity. Slim carefully folded and put down his comic book literature so that he could retreat deeper under his covers clutching tightly to his bosom his very own personal bag of Doritos. He did not even have to reach out from under his burlap bag and plastic wrapped covers to pull out his chips. Only his chin and the tips of his shoulders were exposed. He now had a wool hat firmly pulled down over his afro. The only one completely impervious to the mounting cold was the woman who kept on rocking gently to let out deep

stomached grunts or grumbles of delight--sort of like uncontrollable orgasms of the mind. Who is happy and who is living wrong?

If it had not been for the cold, I might have been able to continue relaxing and having fun in the gallery. These folks were indeed making me feel like an insider's guest. Doc kept punctuating this sense of welcome with constructive flurries of activity, wiping off the shooting table, restoking the fire, neatly repositioning what looked like a garbage can in the corner, or passing back and forth another round of salty/sweet packages of the legally processed poisons--Doritos, popcorn, hard candies, cookies--that Flex had just run out to buy for us. Indeed the violent mix of salt and sugar that these emaciated junkies were devouring on empty stomachs reflected the same logic of their speedball highs: two intensely pleasurable opposites mixed together to an even more pleasurable excess. Presumably the multinational food companies have long since figured out the salt/sugar speedball principle--at least that is what the ingredients list on the plastic packaging of their processed food would suggest. How else could a Big Mac taste so good?

Treated to candy, popcorn, potato chips, Heineken, and a preferential seat by the fire--feeling downright nurtured--it was hard to place the broken-down, "mean vicious", hustling addicts around me (who were chatting and giggling like any happy adults in a good sharing mood) in any kind of structural context. They appreciated being taken seriously and liked the idea of having a book written about them. Taking advantage of their desire to collaborate, I steered the conversation away from the mass of descriptive particulars on narcotized social relations that I had been experiencing so warmly. I wanted to understand the organization of power that has enabled them to destroy themselves and their community so painfully in their life-long sprint for ecstasy. The talk consequently veered towards racism and black/white relations.

Doc began telling me "all about" Malcolm X. Even the doped-out, pleasure-groaning woman was nodding happily, communicating wise respect in response to "Malcolm's" name, cruising on Doc's cocaine-inspired wavelength. But Doc very appropriately threw us all for a reality-check loop. No room for romantic struggle or liberation here:

Sure, I used to hear Malcolm talk. At least I imagine I had to hear him cause they tell me he used to speak on 125th street. But I wasn't listening. I was too busy picking pockets and robbing people to pay attention. I had to have heard him though. That's where I worked, 125th and Lenox. I was probably looking into all them peoples' pockets. Hell! I musta been looking into his pocket too.

Indeed, a Malcolm X sidewalk speech would have been an ideal site to "dip and dab". Pickpockets "work" crowds--especially crowds rapt in attention by inspired charismatic speakers.

I tried exploring Doc's life-history thinking I would document his dislocation within the uprooted migrant stream from rural North Carolina to Harlem but instead--as could have been predicted in retrospect--I discovered he was a second-generation New Yorker. He insisted on a laconic oversimplified summary of his life: "I started shooting heroin at 14 and now I'm 64." Obligated to expand on the details, Doc admitted he had visited his mother's family on one or two occasions "down there in Carolina", but he never stayed long because, "I'm from the North and down there they lynch black folk for being from the North. You see, you might make friends with a white-boy by mistake. Or you might look at a white woman. They lynch you for that."

At 4:30, I realized I was freezing. We had almost a half a dozen candles lit up; the room was on a coke rush--everyone talking fast and all at once. Nevertheless, my son had to be taken to his day care the next morning and since I was not making much progress collecting any politico-structural insights, I decided to retreat. Consequently, when they pooled together their "last cents" one more time to send Flex out for more sweet and sour industrially-processed poison, I exited with him.

The goodbyes were almost touching because Pops the old dude in the background who I thought had long since suffocated or frozen under his blankets popped up to sitting position mumbling, "Just ask for me when you knock on the 'door'. I'm always here even when Doc's gone." And Doc just kept saying "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come by any time; just ask for Doc or Pop--No problem. No problem. You hear [snarled]?" I looked all the way around the room into each set of eyes nodding and smiling. Only Slim and the woman did not respond. Slim was finally asleep, snuggled under the covers, a last candle still barely flickering above his rastafarian wool cap. The woman had sunk back into the flow of the heroin part of her high echoing once again oblivious groans of ecstasy.

Almost skipping to keep up with Flex--I did not want to have to walk through the "lobby" alone again--I stepped through the plywood plank blocking the "doorway" and then tried to place my feet in exactly the same spots Flex's had landed so as not to fall through the "lobby floor" into the basement. Finally we were ducking through the broken bricks in the back wall facing the wide open rubble field. Shivering in the early dawn drizzle, side-by-side with Flex, I allowed the thought to pass through my mind for a fleeting second or two that maybe he would finally mug me violently now that we were beyond the controlling influence of the gallery--after all he was younger than everyone else there and they had all complained about the unpredictable

irresponsibility of today's youth. I soon felt guilty--or more precisely like a bad ethnographer for misjudging character--because Flex became even gentler and shier once we were one-on-one and away from Doc's domineering personality. He was only too eager to continue explaining things to me patiently and precisely. For example about the gallery's ownership, he said: "Well no one really owns it. Actually it really is the City that owns it 'cause it's an abandoned building." Hence the redefinition of private property; only in America can the municipalities and their taxpayers be the single biggest landlords of crack houses and shooting galleries. The omnipotent free market has produced a mass of tax-foreclosed abandoned buildings. There is no longer any healthy profit to be made by even the most ruthless legal gougers in the inner city.

Flex also explained straightforwardly that the police had "stopped visiting us" as soon as "we stopped selling out of the building. Because you see we're really sort of homeless. So when the Poh-Lease used to come we would just tell them 'We just living here.' And they stopped bothering us. The Poh-lease really don't want no trouble neither." There had been some other folks selling out of the building--"but Doc stopped all that. So it really is Doc who is managing the spot. You could say it's like his place."

I could have felt like a bat coming out of an infected cave except that it was worse outside on the street. To make it home I had to pass through the wildest crack corner of El Barrio, 119th and 2nd Avenue which on the west side of the block also doubles as an outdoor shooting gallery. On 119th the energy is entirely constituted by "thirsty crackhead" paranoia. By now I was alone and walking fast knowing that I no longer could be realistically mistaken for an undercover detective. I could only hope that I looked too boracho y pelado [drunk and broke] or "thirsty and bugged out" to make it worth mugging me. Instead, I was immediately hailed by a remote acquaintance waving his stem at me like a long-lost friend, "Hi! Need a stem? I got a nice place for you to smoke." For a moment I was almost persuaded that this grimacing face genuinely wanted my company. He was indeed deeply thrilled at the prospect of my depositing some resin in his pipe that he could subsequently scrape into a vestigial high.

Postscript: March, 1991

I never returned to the gallery and now it is a pile of rubble. It was not razed to make way for urban renewal or subsidized housing. A city demolition team destroyed it following an embarrassing building cave-in that necessitated blocking off the block for an entire day. The City of New York was probably most concerned that some injured citizen might sue the municipality for negligent failure to maintain public

property. Perhaps I failed to revisit Pop and Doc because Angel, one of my few middle-aged junkie friends, reprimanded me sharply for being so stupid when I offered to treat him to a trip to the "moreno" shooting gallery: "Estas loco! Puede ser que tu eres un blanco que habla muy bien el Espanol pero siques siendo blanco. Entiendes" Esta gente son malos. No les importa nada. Accuedate que siempre seras un blanquito." [Are you crazy! You might speak good Spanish but you're still white. Those people are bad; nothing matters to them. And remember, you will always be a white-boy.]

CONCLUSION

There might be an obvious explanation for the ecstatic self-destruction of such a vast number of blacks and Hispanics at the heart of America's greatest cities. Inner-city public sector breakdown is overwhelming. The miles and miles of abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots of vacant garbage are powerful testimony to a profound infrastructural crisis. There has been no concerted attempt by the government to intervene on behalf of this obvious misery. Neither the private sector nor the state pretends to function or to care about places like East Harlem. More objectively, the disproportionate ethnic-specific statistics on male homicide, infant mortality, childhood hunger, and homelessness also clearly point to a profoundly racist political economy that flourishes on extreme levels of social marginalization.

While most Americans recognize and decry this macro-structural context for extreme urban poverty, few are able to relate it in a coherent or political manner to the violence and suffering festering at the very cores of their financial

capitals. American ideology has little or no definition of public responsibility to maintain a citizenry's droits de l'homme; individual civil liberties reign supreme. The populace cannot help but subscribe wholeheartedly to an individualistic blame-the-victim interpretation of poverty. Psychological deficiencies are thought to be at the root of social crisis and marginalization. At best, larger-scale, socially-based explanations for poverty limit themselves to critiquing the errant cultural orientations of the poor.

Worse yet, within the inner city itself, the obvious objective horrors enveloping the community--inadequate jobs, racism, and inferior public services--are understood and acted upon in a mea culpa fashion. For example, a social critic could interpret Doc, the manager/owner of the shooting gallery to be the personification of southern racial violence and forced migration. Of course, Doc has a specific individualized etiology--such as perhaps an abusive mother, incompetent school teachers, deficient role models, the personal insult of being poor, no real job alternatives, hipster street-friend influences, or specific racist confrontations--to account for his internally directed violence and his social demobilization. At the same time, it is impossible to argue with the fact that being a shooting gallery manager/owner in an abandoned building is a better alternative to being lynched in one's mother's hometown for "smiling sideways at white folk". Regardless of the good

historical and structural reasons for Doc's degradation, he has become the most proximate agent for "black genocide" in his community through his oppositional pursuit of personal satisfaction and nurturance. He passes out HIV-positive house needles because he is too cheap and out of control to keep a bottle of Clorox handy. At the same time, he is thrilled at the opportunity to treat an occasional white visitor to a bottle of Heineken.

Americans in general subscribe to a popularized version of the "culture of poverty" theory to explain Doc's existence. Of course, among academics, the culture of poverty approach which was formally developed by Oscar Lewis in the very same neighborhood, East Harlem, where these field notes were collected, has been rigorously--and polemically--critiqued for its internal inconsistencies, its middle-class bias, its ethnocentrism, and its obfuscation of structural dynamics. Nevertheless, despite the negative consensus on the culture of poverty among scholars who study the inner city in the United States, no coherent theoretical framework has effectively supplanted the concept. Most critiques have tended towards economic reductionism or have ultimately minimized the reality of profound marginalization and destruction--some of it internalized--enmiring a large share of the urban poor.

Alternative interpretations of misery and oppression need to re-channel the debates around culture and poverty to more exciting theoretical arenas that reframe material reality's relationship to ideology and redefine how social process emerges in the confrontation between structure and agency. Perhaps because I am limited by anthropology's arbitrary methodological boundaries, I remain firmly committed to ethnography as a key to understanding extreme social misery. At the same time, however, I have been forced to recognize the potentially obfuscating perspective that the ethnographic endeavor imposes. Most obviously, immersing oneself full-time in extreme and disorienting settings such as the apartheid worlds of crack and intravenous heroin is a frightening and personally draining experience. On an immediate descriptive level, given the tremendous ideological polarization around poverty studies in America, raw ethnographic data risks fueling racist stereotypes and ever popular blame-the-victim convictions, no matter how much truth one speaks to power. On a deeper, theoretical level, ethnography can systematically distort analytic perspective into a self-contained morass of individualistic relationships that mask historical process, and deny larger structural-power relations.

Specific aspects of life in the underground economy are easy to account for. Naked expressions of violence, for example, can be re-interpreted as judicious public investments in "human

capital". Dealers, addicts, and just plain "wanna-bees" are obliged to engage periodically in visible displays of aggression if they are to maintain any credibility on the street. Should they fail, they will be mugged, ripped-off, and ridiculed.

The underground economy and the social relations thriving off of it are best understood as modes of resistance to America's social and material marginalization, but this resistance is predicated upon the self-destruction of the inner-city community: substance abuse and violence. This dynamic is especially depressing for the long-term ethnographer to document because the complex dynamic whereby resisting oppression leads to self-destruction is interpreted by the larger society--and indeed by inner-city residents as well--as irrefutable proof that crack house and shooting gallery habitues are just--to use the words of a southern white sheriff in Mississippi Burning, a Hollywood drama of American racism--"a bunch of niggers running wild and shooting up their own asshole". The physical violence imploding East Harlem is largely self-contained: "black/(brown) on black/(brown)". The occasional severe brutality of the racist white police officer pales before the terror or distrust most residents hold for their neighbors.

In other parts of the world, when my fieldwork has confronted me with intense brutality and violence, the distressing cruelty and pain served to clarify the dynamics of

oppression for the victims rather than to confuse them and to paralyze them as it does in the case of America's inner cities. For example, in the shooting gallery when Slim asks Pop to "shoot" him in the jugular, he considers it a favor. Pop, a superannuated dope fiend who is proud of his skill, is only too happy to oblige. Similarly the young mother who was shot a half-dozen times with a sawed off shotgun in front of my window two summers ago was assumed by my neighbors and myself to have more or less "deserved" her fate even though she left behind a three year-old daughter. After all, what could she have expected? she had smoked up the consignment of crack she was supposed to have sold.

The closest the folks on the street in front of my apartment came to understanding that particular mother's murder in terms of their relationship to the larger society was in the grumbles of the rubber neckers that the woman might have lived had the ambulance arrived faster and had the emergency technician not paused to put on rubber gloves before pressing shut the severed artery in her neck. Given America's intensely racial idiom, the clear "white vs black" dichotomy which might have made this scene clearer is obscured. For example, it might be true that the ambulance could have arrived sooner but the driver, his First Aid companion, and probably the telephone operator who I reported the shooting to on the emergency 911 telephone line were all Puerto Rican just like the woman dying in the pool of blood.

Everyone ends up hating themselves and their people as much as the system. Furthermore, the First Aid technician who had trouble pulling on his gloves while blood gushed from the pierced artery in the dying woman's neck was not racist. He was only trying to protect himself from the HIV virus rampant in the blood of street-murdered women in New York--his people's blood.

Similarly, all the discussions of jail that I have tape-recorded confirm that the worst part of the prison experience is not the guards, or the bars, or the wretched food, or the racist, humiliating judges and lawyers--i.e., the objectively oppressive institution--but rather the fellow inmates. As on the street, it is the victims themselves who are the most ruthless and effective administrators and agents of violence and terror. This is the most misunderstood and crucial dimension of oppression. Inmates throughout history and the world become the enforcers and executors of the most barbaric dimensions of their own torture. Street-life confronts us with a recurrent version of the Nazi holocaust nightmare that humanity cannot escape and refuses to face: the Sonderkommandos [gas chamber death squads] were Jewish. If we overlook or ignore this dimension for fear of contributing to racist stereotypes or out of a sensitive respect for a community's reputation, we deny one of the most fundamental premises of the experience of oppression.

Why is the street so overwhelming? The multi-billion dollar drug industry--the only growing equal-opportunity employer in America's inner cities for at least the past decade--offers an obviously powerful material base for what could be called "street culture". The stakes are extraordinarily high, and it would be atheoretical to think that such dramatic economic vigor could be neutral ideologically or culturally. For example, at heroin copping corners such as the chain link fence in Jefferson Park or in the children's playground in front of the administrative headquarters of East Harlem's public school system on 117th Street, the money literally flows in fistfuls. Within minutes, a hundred junkies can be served and dozens of bundles of heroin distributed. It is hard to understand why education officials act surprised and worried that this neighborhood has one of the highest school drop-out rates in the country when all this is going on right outside the School District's office windows. The elementary school children are treated to this spectacle every single day on their way to and from school. Similarly, it is physically impossible to walk from any of East Harlem's subway stations to the gate of the neighborhood's "magnet" high school without walking through a drug-copping corner. Meanwhile, amidst the Census Bureau's statistics boasting some of the nation's highest poverty rates, public assistance dependency rates etc., skinny men in sneakers with holes spend 20, 40, even 50 dollars without flinching for a half dozen or so hours of psychic and physical relief.

The drug economy, especially retail crack sales is currently out-competing the legal, entry-level economy for the hearts and minds of inner-city youth. The children growing up in my tenement are not disorganized or apathetic. On the contrary, they are overly organized and energetic. Their mobilization, however, destroys both themselves and their community. The most determined, lucky, and ruthless are running thousand dollar a day sales networks and are not yet 18. They keep regular hours and supervise half a dozen employees who work on consignment or for an hourly wage. According to police records, millions of dollars worth of drug sales are going on within a stone's throw of the youths living in my building. Why should we be surprised when they drop out of school to "get a piece of mine's"? And why should we wonder why they refuse low prestige jobs in the service sector in favor of building up crack/cocaine enterprises where their identities rooted in street culture become an asset rather than a liability?

Like any normal Americans, the dealers believe with a vengeance in the Great American Dream: rags to riches through private entrepreneurship. Most will not succeed, however. They will be crushed in their endeavor and they will most likely fall prey to drug addiction and/or a paralyzing depression. This does not stop those who do succeed from driving their Mercedes, Jaguars, and Porsches up to the fire hydrant at the curb to be washed and waxed by local crack addicts while they stand

triumphantly ten yards away and watch the children on the block ogle their "ride". [car].

These same people worked in their youth in the legal labor market. They know what they are escaping. Every single crack dealer and heroin addict that I have befriended has worked at one or more legal jobs in their childhood. In fact, most violated child labor laws in their eagerness to get to work. Before they were 12 years old, they were bagging groceries at the supermarket for tips, stocking beers off-the-books in local "bodegas"¹³, or shining shoes. In fact, many dropped out of school in order to make money to obtain the childhood "necessities"--candy, potato chips, sneakers, basketballs, baseball cards--that most pre-teenagers are able to buy with their allowance money.

The material alternative to entry-level employment that the drug industry offers could explain all by itself the powerful appeal of street culture. Any formidable economic base is bound to spawn a cultural or ideological dimension. In the case of street culture, however, American racism conflates with the economically generated appeal to create an even more dynamic and persuasive alternative to white bourgeois culture. This has been exacerbated by the transition from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. Service jobs require unconditional submission to bourgeois culture. Street culture has no place or power at work. The inner-city resident who does not faithfully imitate white

middle-class society's modes of interaction will be fired--or, worse yet, ridiculed into submission. In other words, the inner city's would-be working class is systematically humiliated when it seeks employment downtown in the service sector. The street, therefore, offers both a real economic alternative and also an ideological framework that promises pride and self-esteem.

The extraordinary vitality of cultural expression on America's poorest, most despised streets, therefore, is best understood as an oppositional reaction to the conjugation of racism and marginalized employment. The resulting cultural appeal is undeniable; it even crosses class, ethnic, and national boundaries. The music, dance, clothing, styles, and argot emerging out of Harlem ironically have been a driving force in fashion and mainstream popular culture both nationally and internationally. Contradictorily, however, on the street where this alternative framework is inextricably rooted in drugs and in the violence that drug dealing requires, the result is self-destruction and community havoc.

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NOTES

1. To cop is an inner-city term for purchasing drugs on the street.
2. In fact, it was even featured in a telephoto-zoom night-shot in National Geographic, May, 1990.
3. Crack is cocaine that has been dissolved in warm water, combined with baking soda, and then cooled into a solid.
4. Street level operations are composed of units of three or more employees. One or two lookouts usually also steer customers, and then the pitcher carries the drugs and "serves" the customers. There is also a "runner" who brings the bundles of dope down to the street from the apartments where it is "milled" i.e. cut and packaged. The runner, after dropping and collecting the money, is supposed to leave the street-scene for obvious reasons. The problem is that many runners are so much a part of the street (some are homeless) that they have no where else to go and they end up hanging around and getting busted unnecessarily.
5. Preble, Edward and John Casey. 1969. Taking Care of Business: The Heroin User's Life on the Street. International Journal of Addictions 4:1-24.
6. The tape on top of the stamp does not just hold the envelope shut. It also keeps addicted and greedy sellers from taking out an unnoticeable smidgen of powder from each packet, known as "tapping the bag". When you pull off the tape to open the envelope, some of the ink is wrenched off with it, hence any violation of the product can be detected. That is how a friend's brother who is an old-fashioned heroin addict was caught by his boss. Supposedly his employer was looking to break his legs but he was hospitalized and then jailed before they could get to him following an unrelated street squabble last New Year's Eve.